A Plea for Sanity and Cry for Mercy

Bella Gomez

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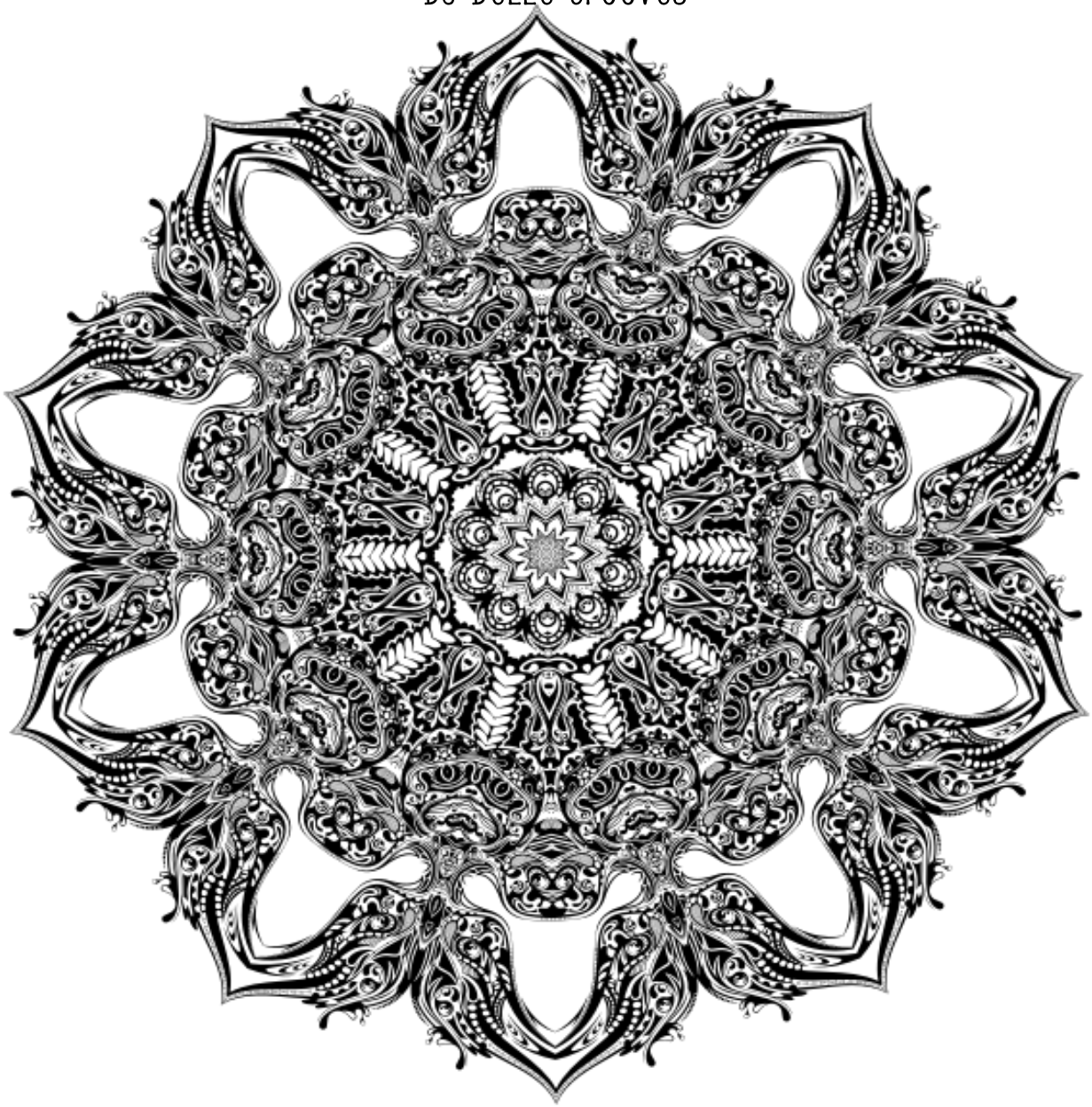
By Belle Grooves



For Leo, the one who pushed me to write a story in first person.
For Dad, my inspiration.
For Layney, my helper.
For Sol, the one who gave me directions and suggestions.
For Eli, my supporter.
For Annie, my listener.
And for the rest of my siblings who encouraged me. And my beyond wonderful mother.
Also, for my extended family, who didn't ask questions.
Love y'all forever.

FOREWORD

Hi! I'm Teddy and I wrote this foreword...probably. First off, sorry there's no table of contents. There're simply those star things to separate important parts. And speaking of important parts...

I'm here to tell you that everything in this story actually happened to me. This is my life, well an important part of it, anyway. I hope you'll enjoy reading about me! Ooops. That sounded really selfish and arrogant, huh. Well, I hope you enjoy reading a story about a madman's life. Ahh, much better.

If you have schizophrenia or were wrongly diagnosed with it, I understand. I know how you feel. I've experienced what it's like, sort of. I can at least sympathize with you, which is something a lot of people can't. I hope you schizophrenics are doing all right.

Now, listen closely.

Somewhere out there is a terrorist group. Hunting people down and killing them for fun. They took my father and I intend to end every last one of them. The Demonized Clowns. I sincerely hope you never come across them. If you're reading this because you think it's just fiction and you want some entertainment, then please, continue. But if you're reading this because you believe you've come across the clowns, put this book down right now and run. Hide your family, go to another country, and get a new identity. Once they've found you, it's already too late...

On that happy note, enjoy!

I'm about to tell you my story, well, the first part. We'll continue once you know how I got stuck in this stupid place. That's right, the reason I'm sitting in a psychiatric hospital. And before you ask, no, I'm not crazy, deranged, delusional, and/or depressed. Or anything else that gets people into the psychiatric ward. I'm quite the average teen if I do say so myself. Besides the strange things that happen around me, but we'll get to that later. Anyway, let's get the introduction out of the way.

My name is Theodore Bridgeford but call me Teddy. Today is my birthday and I'm turning fifteen. I know, a pretty lame way to spend your birthday. My father died when I was five, so I don't remember it all that well. He was a police officer who took a bullet while chasing down a terrorist. I try not to dwell on that too much. I live in Utah and go to a school called Clearfield High. I'm writing this story because I believe it will help people who're like me. Not kids who go to school or get stuck in the loony bin, but people who can do what I can.

Let's start at the beginning of my school day. Don't worry, I didn't go to school *on* my birthday. Just a few days before. I awoke to the sound of my stupid alarm clock roostering and nearly deafening me, as usual. The glowing blue numbers read: 6:00 a.m. I rolled out of bed and pulled on a shirt. I could already smell my mother's wonderful pancakes.

"Morning, honey." She said.

I walked to her and kissed her on the cheek. "Morning Mom. What are the pancakes for?

"To eat."

"Ha-ha." I wondered why she was really making pancakes, she generally only made them for special occasions. Maybe someone was coming over, though I couldn't imagine who.

"Teddy, would you please get the whipped cream and strawberries?" Mom called from the kitchen

"Sure." I went to the fridge and sat the items on the table.

A few minutes later Mom served me a plate of five pancakes topped with syrup, strawberries, and whipped cream. And they tasted like heaven. Mom just sat in a chair beside me and stared aimlessly

"What's up Mom?" I asked

She turned to me, smiling. "Nothing, dear. I'm just waiting.

Waiting? "For what?

"For someone to get here."

That scared me. Mom never invited anyone to our house. The last

time she did it hadn't ended well. There's still a crack in one of the windows. "Who?" I finally asked.

"A man named Patrick Frass. He's a nice man, Teddy. When he gets here, please don't do anything. Or try not to anyway."

I knew what she meant by "don't do anything". But I couldn't always control it. Sometimes it just happened without my consent. And it was always chaotic and horrible. It scared everyone, including me.

"Is he staying for a while?" I asked.

"Nah. Just a week." Mom answered from the kitchen, she was washing the dishes.

I like how she said 'nah, a week.' That's a while if you ask me. "Where's he staying?

"In the guest room, of course. Why?

"Just wondering." In truth, I didn't want him to stay in my room.

I brought my empty plate to Mom and helped her finish loading the dishwasher before leaving to get ready for school.

Our apartment was miniscule, so I just walked through a door to get to my room. I grabbed my backpack, did the goodbye routine with Mom, and left for school. It was only ten blocks from where we lived, so I typically walked. And rushed to my first class, psychology. We were supposed to be studying the focusing mechanism of the brain. It's confusing. I fell asleep not even halfway through the chapter last night. And I have trouble focusing because of my ADHD.

"Nice of you to join us, Mr. Bridgeford." Professor Lillykins said. He was always trying to make his students embarrassed. At least he accomplished his goal

I walked down to my seat and pulled out my books.

"Today we're studying the human brain's focusing abilities. Without focus, we wouldn't be able to do our jobs, homework, or even watch TV before getting bored or otherwise distracted." He glared at me, not a good sign. "Who can tell me what mechanism allows the brain to focus?"

Not a single person raised their hand. And that meant Professor Lillykins would begin asking the least likely person to answer the question correctly. In other words, me

"How about you, Mr. Bridgeford. Enlighten us.

"I...What was the question again?" I stammered

"What makes the brain focus?"

I hadn't read nearly enough for this. How was I supposed to remember all the functions of the brain? I mean, I knew there was the

left side and right side. Oh, and possibly the center squishy part. "I...I don't know, sir."

Mr. Lillykins sighed, seeing Ben raise his hand. And Ben never got the wrong answer. "Mr. Colling. Go ahead."

"To stay focused, your brain needs a "braking system" to prevent the wrong things from popping into your mind. Scientists think this job is performed by the ventrolateral prefrontal cortex, VLPFC for short, just behind each of your temples. Your brain directs focus capability by filtering important information and moving it up the ladder for deeper processing while suppressing interruptions from irrelevant bits and pieces, a function known as efficient selection. But even with its elegant processing filters, your brain can still lose focus." That's Ben Colling for you, my best friend

"That's correct, Mr. Colling."

And the rest of my classes dragged on until it was finally lunch break. They were serving the usual sandwiches, chips, and juice. I found the table where Ben was sitting, alone. Everybody disliked him because he wore glasses and got all the right answers. In reality, they were jealous. But he was my best and only friend, because whenever I was around stuff happened. We'll get to that stuff later though

"You really need to start studying, Teddy." Ben said

"It's not that easy. I actually have to use my brain." I replied

"You're always using your brain. To breathe, think, see, feel-"

I stopped him before he could finish. "You know what I meant." I looked at him. "Wanna come to my house later?

"Sure. I can spend the night.

"No." I wasn't supposed to let people sleep at my house because of my frequent nightmares. I usually woke up yelling or crying. They're so real, like being there yourself. Trust me, you've never experienced my nightmares. "But you can stay until dinner. Besides, you'll be with me all day Saturday.

"Okay." I could always count on Ben not to argue. He didn't think it was logical.

We headed for our next classes, which passed with tedious speed. It was like time was dragging its feet across the ground, making everything go extra slow. Once school was at last over, I was heading home when I came across Fredrick Higgins. Along with his posse, Silvester Dort and William Bouvard. Fredrick had massive muscles, like he was training to join the navy or something. The other two were muscley and shorter than Fred, but taller than me. I was two years younger than all of them and only five foot four.

"Well, if it isn't Carrots himself." Fred said, in reference to my bright orange hair. Sometimes they called me Leprechaun or Leppy. It was downright annoying.

"I didn't tell, just leave me alone." I said. They had shoved me in a trashcan yesterday, but I hadn't been dumb enough to say who did it. I knew they'd come after me if I did. And for some stupid reason, if I was bullied it was me who got detention. Ridiculous.

"Sure you didn't. You're gonna pay."

Crud. "Listen, I swear I didn't. Please, just let me go home."

"Once we're finished, Leppy."

They dragged me outside behind the school where nobody would see and pushed me onto the ground. "This'll teach you not to be a tattle tale."

Fredrick kicked me in the gut, knocking my breath away. Then he punched me in the face several times. William kicked me hard on the side. Agony pumped through my veins like blood. My ribs felt broken, my nose was bleeding, and I could feel my eye bruising. When they finally all stood, I could barely sit up without pain coursing through my entire body.

"I think he's gonna cry for his mommy!" William laughed.

"Hey, guys. Leave him alone." Milly Fester was standing by the back school door, her syrupy eyes and golden hair gorgeous as ever.

While I'm being completely honest and all, I'll say I've had a crush on Milly for ages. She sings in choir, and I stand by the door to listen to her. Everybody has a crush on Millicent, she's just that girl. She's popular, and I'm not. Which is why I've never spoken to her. She deserves better than me. But I suppose one hello would've been better than what I was getting myself into.

"What are you gonna do about it?" Fredrick asked, pulling me up by my hair and bringing tears to my eyes. From the pain, obviously.

"Mrs. Etchart is right inside. I could fetch her if you like." Mrs. Etchart was the choir teacher, and she would've gotten onto Higgins and his posse for beating me up big time. But I think we all knew she was bluffing.

"Yeah, right. We were just finishing anyway, Ugly Milly."

I don't know if it was insulting Milly, or simply my rage at being beat to a pulp, but it happened. A tree fell right where Fredrick and his buddies had been standing before bolting. And I knew my emotions had been the cause of the casualty.

I looked at Milly when I ran for home, and her eyes were wide. I

hoped she didn't know what had just happened. Did I even really know what had just happened?

* * *

When I arrived home, I went straight to the bathroom to assess the damage. Mom wasn't home yet, which was a good thing, but that Patrick Frass was likely to be here already. At least I could avoid talking to him and go right to my room.

I wiped the blood from my face with a wet towel. My eye wasn't that bad, just a little green and purple. Then I checked my ribs. Yikes! My entire right side was bruised badly. I could feel the sharp pain with every intake of breath. Those losers really did it this time. Lucky for them that tree hadn't killed them. I might just do it myself next time I saw them.

I went into the kitchen and stopped at the entrance. Sitting at the table with my mother was Patrick Frass. Black hair slicked to one side, expensive beige suit, and awesome briefcase. He looked about ready to sell our house for us. And just as I was sneaking away, Mom saw me.

"What happened Teddy?" she asked, practically running to my side.

"Some kids bullied me. The usual." I tried to hide my agony from my broken ribs from Mom, but to put it simply, she's a mom. And she hugged me. "Sorry." I said, pulling away.

"What's wrong? Why did they bully you?"

"It doesn't matter right now. I don't want to talk about it."

"At least two of his ribs are broken, Rebecca." Patrick suddenly said. He walked to my mom's side. "Pull your shirt up, Mr. Bridgeford."

Reluctantly, I lifted my shirt. I figured if I didn't Mr. Frass would, and I certainly didn't want that. My mother gasped and tears sprang to her eyes. I wondered how Mr. Frass had known how many ribs were broken and how he could tell.

"How did you know?" I asked him.

"The way you were breathing and holding yourself." He looked me over. "And by the amount of bruising. You should get to the hospital."

"I don't think it's that bad." Just inhaling felt like daggers. But I really didn't want to go to the hospital.

"Suit yourself. Either way, you need pain medication. Do y'all have any ibuprofen?"

* * *

We were all sitting in the living room after Mom had rubbed ointment on my ribs. Then she'd wrapped bandages around the wound, extremely painful. As was breathing and anything that involved moving. And I hadn't taken anything yet. Mr. Frass had said to wait forty-eight hours before taking ibuprofen, as it might slow the healing.

"Thanks, Mr. Frass." I said.

"You're very welcome. And Patrick will do. You're Theodore, yes?" he replied.

I nodded.

"Your mother has told me lots about you, Teddy. You have ADHD, I believe."

I wasn't sure if that was a question, so I nodded in answer. I wondered where this was going.

"And you believe your emotions cause things to happen." Patrick continued.

"How do you know that? Who are you?" I demanded.

Patrick looked at me with his intense gray eyes. "May I speak with young Theodore alone?" he asked Mom.

"I need to get dinner ready anyway." She kissed me on the forehead and left.

I didn't want Mom to leave me alone with this guy. Had she told Patrick what I can do? I nervously adjusted the ice pack for my aching ribs. Patrick leaned forward, clasping his hands in his lap.

"Theodore Bridgeford. Five feet four inches. Red hair and green eyes. Fourteen years old and born on June 14, 2008. Diagnosed with ADHD. Father left him at the age of five. And strange things happen around Teddy when he's extremely emotional. At least, he thinks they do." The way Patrick recited this chilled me to the core. It was like he was reading my life document or something. If he was trying to unsettle me, he was accomplishing his goal on every level.

"What does any of that have to do with why you're here or who you are?" I asked.

"Teddy, I'm here to help you. I'm a psychiatrist."

"What? I don't need a shrink to tell me how to live my life. Why are you here?"

"I said I'm here to help you." He stared at me for a moment before continuing. "I believe you're delusional and suffer from depression. Death of a loved one can take its toll."

I was stunned. "I'm not depressed or delusional. I barely even remember my father's death."

"Anyone would say that. Your mother, Rebecca, asked me here. I'm a good friend of hers and she's worried about her little boy. These things you say happen are what we shrinks call delusions and desire for attention."

"I don't desire attention!" I yelled. This guy was really getting on my nerves. "I have Mom and that's enough." I crossed my arms, forgetting about my ribs, and winced.

"Look, Teddy, if you refuse to cooperate and have sessions for at least a week, I'll have no choice but to bring you into the ward. I don't want you to make me do that."

"I can't make you do anything. And I'm not going anywhere." I was beginning to wonder where on earth Ben was. "Mom, do you know where Ben is?" I asked.

"I told him not to come tonight." She answered.

Bummer. I turned back to Patrick. "I'll do your stupid sessions and whatnot. But only for one week."

"Good. The first starts now." Patrick said.

We sat in awkward silence for ages. After what felt like ten minutes, I couldn't stand it anymore.

"Aren't you going to say something?"

"Theodore, *you* must tell *me* what's on your mind."

"Okay. One, you need to stop switching between Theodore and Teddy. Just call me one or the other. Two, to put it simply, agony." That wasn't everything on my mind, but he didn't need to know that.

"Interesting. What about school?"

"What about it?"

"Theodore, please just answer the question." Patrick sighed, jotting something on his notepad.

"School's fine, I guess. Besides being bullied all the time." I said.

"Anyone special?"

"Uh, you mean like, a girlfriend?"

"Precisely."

"No." I didn't think he needed to know I had a crush on someone I'd never spoken to.

"One last question. What happened to the children who did *that*?" Patrick indicated my ribs.

"You won't believe me. And I'm not taking any chances with the loony bin." I didn't want to give him more reason to think I was delusional.

"Try me." I said nothing. "Alright, I'll get the papers ready for the psychiatric ward." Patrick began standing up.

"Wait. I'll tell you." Patrick raised an expectant eyebrow. "A tree almost fell on top of them."

"Almost?"

"They moved before it hit them. And it didn't touch me."

* * *

I lied in my bed thinking about what Patrick Frass had said. Would they take me to the loony bin? At least I wouldn't be going to school for some time. And tomorrow, whether Patrick liked it or not, I'm taking ibuprofen if it kills me. And then my nightmares filled my head. Always the same.

I woke in a cold sweat, breathing hard. My nightmares never failed to amaze or terrify. I pulled on some clothes and went downstairs. When I got to the kitchen, I saw Patrick drinking coffee at the bar. I grabbed an ice pack for my aching ribs and sat next to him. Maybe he wasn't all that bad.

"Couldn't sleep?" he asked.

"No. I usually can't. I have these horrible nightmares all the time." It was too late when I realized my mistake. Now Patrick had even more motive to toss me in the psychiatric ward. A kid who can't sleep because of recurring nightmares. That sounded like someone mental to me.

"Interesting. And what are these nightmares about, Theodore?"

"I'd rather not say. I don't want you to think I'm insane or suffer from Nightmarephobia."

"That's not a thing." Patrick looked at me like I really was mad. "Just keep in mind what I said."

I remembered what he'd said alright. This guy was practically blackmailing me. Never mind, he *was* blackmailing me. If I didn't tell him, I'd have the loony bin to reason with dang it. And I'm not getting my mom involved. I couldn't afford to get worked up, lest something should happen because of me and my emotions. Turns out he *was* as bad as I thought, maybe worse.

I sighed. "Fine. It's always the same and I always expect it, but one thing is always different. And it scares me.

"Yes?" Patrick's face gleamed with eagerness. It was kind of creepy.

"This boat is sinking and on fire and I'm trying to save all the passengers, but I always fail to save one person." I looked away, tears coming to my eyes remembering who it had been tonight. The first time I've ever dreamed it was her. And it had seemed so real...

"Who was it? Who didn't you rescue?"

"It...it was Mom. She sank with the boat." I wiped away my tears and turned to my shrink. "What does it mean?"

"Well, it was simply a nightmare." He jotted something down on his notepad, which he always seemed to keep handy. "And you said this nightmare reoccurs?"

"Yeah. Only the person is different each time."

"Have you ever seen anyone die in real life?"

"No."

"Killed anyone?" Patrick asked.

I stood up; he had gone too far to suggest I'd kill someone. That's outrageous! "Of course not! Listen Patrick and listen closely. You don't just come into people's houses and accuse them of murder! If that's why you're here, you can please escort yourself out this instant!"

Before he had time to answer or say 'interesting', the books flew from the bookshelf. They scattered themselves across the floor and one hit me on the side. New agony shot through my ribs, and I fell to my knees. I must have passed out because the next thing I knew, I was lying on the sofa.

"What happened?" Mom asked, running her fingers through my hair.

"The books just flew off the shelves." Patrick replied, narrowing his eyes at me. "After Theodore was finished yelling my ears off."

Mom looked at me, worry evident in her face. "I'm so sorry, Mom. It just happens when I'm angry. I'll try to control it, I promise."

"Why were you angry?" she asked in her gentle unaccusatory tone.

"Because Patrick accused me of murder!" I sat up, grabbing my side like I could prevent my ribs from stabbing me.

"No, Rebecca, I asked him if he had ever killed anyone. There's quite a difference you know."

"Why did you ask Teddy if he'd ever killed anyone? That's not your job or the reason you're here." Mom replied.

"He told me about his recurring nightmare. I wondered if it was a cause of survivor's guilt. That's all."

"Yeah, right." I replied. "I'm only answering your stupid questions during our sessions. Period. And it couldn't be survivor's guilt anyway. I've never experienced something that could cause that."

"Fine." Patrick stormed from the living room.

Mom sat next to me and held her head in her hands. "Oh Teddy, what am I going to do?"

"Nothing. Just fire Patrick. I don't need a shrink." I answered. I still couldn't believe Mom thought I needed a psychiatrist.

"I know you're not delusional or depressed, but I think Patrick can really help you, honey. You just need to allow him the privilege of knowing you. Like I do."

I knew Mom would keep pressing me until I got along with Patrick, so I consented to her wishes. "I'll try. But if he accuses me of murder again, I won't hesitate to do something."

"Don't do anything. He'll have more reason to take you away, Teddy. And I won't be able to keep going without my baby boy. Just please try to get along with him. For me." Mom was on the verge of tears.

"Mom, of course I'll try. I'll control myself." I kissed her on the cheek.

She hugged me tight, and I hugged her back, wincing but not resisting her warm embrace. "Love you, Mom."

"Love you too, sweety." And she went to bed.

* * *

The next week passed slowly, time trudging through thick mud. I tried my best to cooperate with Patrick, which turned out well enough. I apologized for the other night, and he forgave me, though grudgingly. And every day at three o' clock he asked me questions and I answered them. I controlled my emotions pretty well, except when a mug fell from the center of the island. And for a week we did this, and it was terribly boring.

On Friday, the day before my birthday, Ben came over. I methodically dodged Patrick to avoid an awkward interrogation and then went to my room. We played video games for hours.

"When are you coming back to school?" Ben asked, staring at the video game screen.

"I'll probably come Monday. But my ribs are still shattered." I replied.

"Actually, if your ribs were shattered, you'd be dead. The shards of bone would most likely stab your lungs and important blood vessels, therefore killing you."

"Dude, it was an exaggeration."

"Oh."

We kept playing Halo until Mom called me for my last session. Thank goodness it was the last one, these things wasted valuable time. I sat in the living area with Patrick while Mom took a nap and

Ben went home.

"Alright, let's get this over with." He said.

"It's about time." I muttered.

"Who was that?" he asked, looking at the door Ben had shut. And that would be the last time I saw my best friend for quite some time.

Patrick hadn't seen Ben since we'd started this insanity. I hadn't invited him over because my ribs were causing me a lot of pain. At least I was taking ibuprofen now.

"That was Ben Colling. He's my best friend."

"Does he treat you well?"

"Of course. Why would I be friends with someone who didn't?"

"I'll be asking the questions." Patrick wrote something down on his notepad. It had been worrying me what he'd been writing down about me all this time. "And you often see each other?"

"Every day at school and when he comes over." I answered.

"What do you do with him?"

Wasn't this supposed to be about me? "Look, enough about Ben. I thought you were assessing me."

"And it matters to me who you spend your time with. Whether they're a good or bad influence on you." This guy, am I right? "What classes do you take during school?"

"I thought you knew everything about my daily life."

"Just answer the question, Theodore."

I sighed and began listing my classes. "Literature, biology, pre calc., language, history, and psychology." I was pretty sure that covered everything.

"Good. So you know what I do. Interesting." I hated when he said that.

"What's interesting?"

"You, Theodore. And your behavior." He looked me in the eyes. "How do you feel about the loss of your father?"

Wow, he certainly knew how to change the subject, but that was private ground. We hadn't talked about my father at all because it usually made me upset. I didn't want to tell him anything about my dad, and I didn't like talking about his death. And sometimes I felt like Patrick was interrogating me rather than being my shrink.

"Well?" Patrick prodded.

"What if I don't want to talk about Dad?" I countered.

"Then I'll leave your transfer to the big boss." He leaned forward, eyeing me closely. "Trust me Theodore, you don't want that."

I crossed my arms, ignoring the pain. "Maybe I do. What's he

gonna do?"

"Much worse than anything I can do. He'll sign you up for delusion medication. He'll make sure the chances of you leaving are slim. You won't ever be the same again, Theodore." He leaned back. "But, of course, it's still your choice."

"You could go to jail, you know."

Patrick smiled. "Is that so? For what?"

"Blackmail. Plain and simple."

"We both know you can't prove a thing. Now, tell me again. How do you feel about the loss of your father?" All the gentleness a shrink should have, Patrick's tone was devoid of it all.

"Fine. I'll play your stupid rigged game. I loved my father and still do. I don't really remember it that well, but I can recall parts of his funeral. And Mom's tears and sadness. But she tried to make it up to me with travels and treats.

"And did Victor Bridgeford love you?"

"Yeah, he did. He used to tell me stories about the strange things that happen. The things people associate with ghosts. And he held me in his strong arms."

"How did he die?" Patrick asked, now sounding a bit more sincere.

"He had been investigating this terrorist group." Patrick held up his hand to stop me

"What was the organization called?"

"Uh...Demonizado Payasos. Or something along those lines."

"Demonized Clowns. Yes, I'm familiar with that group. Continue." I was surprised he knew Spanish. I hadn't even known what they were called in English before he'd said that.

"Anyway, Dad was really close to catching them. I think he'd found evidence that they were selling illegal cocaine. So he chased down one of the men and ended up in an old warehouse. His gun was in its holster, but he wasn't quick enough. The guy pulled out his own gun and he...he shot Dad." Talking about this stirred my emotions. I felt angry and sad. I wanted to find the man who killed my father and end him. And I felt hollow, like part of my heart was missing. Tears welled in my eyes, but I didn't turn away.

"Look, I know this must be hard for you Theodore, but do you know who shot your father?"

I took a deep breath and looked Patrick in the eyes. "Luther Ditka." And I'd never forget that man's name. Never.

* * *

Saturday couldn't have come sooner or at a better time. Patrick would be leaving today, and I'd be turning fifteen. And celebrating my birthday with Ben and Mom. And we'd eat at a place called CowZones. Well, actually, it was called Chef Chica's Chilly Checkered Cow Zone Classes. But that name made about as much sense as flat earth, so I call it CowZones. It was my favorite place to eat. But I didn't know that what was about to happen would change my life forever. For better or worse, I sometimes still wasn't sure.

I walked downstairs and found my shrink sitting in a chair, but Mom was nowhere to be seen. I expected her to be in the kitchen, making crepes, but she was gone. Guess I'd have to ask Patrick.

"Where's Mom?"

"Rebecca? She didn't take the news so well." He patted his hand on the sofa. "Please, take a seat Theodore."

"I'll stand."

"You'll want to sit down for this." Something in his tone frightened me.

When I had settled down, Patrick clasped his hands in front of him and looked at me with what I think was supposed to be sympathy. It was hard to tell because he almost looked happy.

"As you know, I was hired to make sure you weren't delusional or depressed. I've asked you many questions about your daily life, family, and yourself." That's when I stopped him.

"Look, I don't have time for this mumbo jumbo. Just get to the point please."

Patrick sighed. "Very well. We're taking you in, Theodore."

At first, I didn't know what he was talking about. And then the reality sank in. This guy thought I was clinically insane. Patrick was going to take me to the psychiatric ward. The loony bin.

"They're coming in just a few hours to take you. Please understand that this is the right thing to do. It will help many people, including yourself, if you go to the clinic. Theodore, this is what's best for you."

I shook my head. "What's best for me or for you? I don't need to go to the loony bin! There's absolutely nothing wrong with me! You can't do this!"

"Yes, I can. During our sessions, I discovered that you suffer from...self-inflicted delusions." It sounded like he just made that up. "You believe that things happen, impossible things, when you are, shall we say, on edge. You are delusional, Teddy." Patrick explained.

None of this made any sense. He had seen it happen twice. How

could he not believe me? And self-inflicted? If anything, *he's* the one who caused my delusions!

Patrick placed his hand on my shoulder, both of us were standing. "Everything will work out in the end."

I shrugged his hand off and backed away. "I'm not going anywhere with you. Whatever you wrote down in that book of yours, it's all lies. Every single bit of it. I'm not delusional and you know it."

"Listen, get your things. They'll be here soon. And remember Theodore, this is what's best for everyone." Patrick Frass left me standing in the living room alone.

My ribs ached terribly from the deep breaths I was taking to calm myself. If I didn't chill out, something horrible could happen. And at this point, I couldn't afford anything crazy to happen around me. No more insanity, at least for now.

* * *

I sat on my bed, anxiously wringing my hands together. My backpack was supplied with everything I needed. Everything important to me, except Mom and Ben. Oh man, Mom and Ben were my world, without them I might really end up going insane. This birthday sucked to the max.

I wasn't gonna move until they came up here and made me. I had seriously considered tying sheets together and climbing out the window, but the police would just hunt me down. My only other option was bolting when they came in here, but the idea sounded better than the reality. Two or three full grown men would easily catch me, a short fifteen-year-old. And then there were the guns and tasers. I didn't want them testing their aim on me.

Mom came into my room and sat holding me, comforting me for possibly the last time. "Teddy, I love you. I don't want them to take you away, but there isn't much I can do if they have eyewitnesses and written evidence. If only I was coming with you." She began to cry, and so did I.

"Mom, you don't want to go to the loony bin. Besides, don't you always say things will work out in the end?" That's what Patrick had told me. Like he had known my mom's motto...

"And they will, honey. Promise." She kissed me on the forehead.

We sat holding each other until they came. Two tall business guys wearing sunglasses and suits. I stared at them, wondering if they'd been informed of my delusions. When I began to leave with them, Mom stopped me.

"Goodbye, sweetheart. I'll see you soon." We embraced, both knowing she couldn't keep that promise.

Then the men took me away. They grabbed my shoulders and led me to a black Sedan. Patrick was sitting in the back, waiting for me. I sat as far away from him as the seats allowed and stared out the window. Why were they doing this? What could they possibly gain by sending innocent people to the insane asylum? Money.

We drove for hours, much of which I slept during. We passed houses in suburban areas and shacks in the middle of nowhere. Subdivisions and mansions, but I was clueless as to our destination. We could've been in another state or even country and I wouldn't have known. After about two and a half hours of indecision whether I should jump out or not, Patrick's patience relinquished. And he brought me back to reality.

"We're taking you to the clinic for a reason, Theodore. Not just because you're delusional, but because it really will improve your mental health. And it will help with your ADHD. You need this more than anyone we've ever administered here. Theodore, you must understand that I'm simply doing my job. Proverbs 20:6, 'Many will say they are loyal friends, but who can find one who is truly reliable?' Is that what you think of me as?"

I looked at him but said nothing. If he really thought that was true, I would never have anything to say to him again. For as long as I walked on this earth. But that Bible verse was one I had taken to heart when Dad used to read the Bible to me. And yes, I did think of him as an unreliable friend.

He sighed. Then he pulled out a medicine bottle and dumped two pills into his hand. "Here. Your ribs aren't healed all the way, but I expect they will be by next week. This will help with the pain." I hesitantly took the pills and swallowed them.

I hadn't realized how much my ribs hurt until he'd said that. Like red hot daggers stabbing my side. And the agony just intensified. I don't think that medicine was ibuprofen, it seemed to enhance my pain tenfold. I could barely breathe without feeling that searing pain. My vision blurred and I was groaning. It was unbearable.

"What...was...that?" I somehow managed to gasp out.

"Nothing of consequence. It's just to ensure you don't go anywhere. And besides, I never said it would stop the pain. I said it would *help* with the pain." Patrick answered. But something in his tone sounded almost regretful.

Well, I certainly wouldn't be going anywhere in this condition. I passed out.

* * *

When I woke up, my entire right side felt broken and bruised. Those drugs they'd given me were nothing short of pure torture. I could scarcely sit up without gasping in pain. And when I did, my surroundings bored me to death.

Everything around me was glistening white, including me. I was dressed in a white T-shirt and pants, not a good fashion statement. Four circular lights wired into the ceiling were placed in each corner. One small, round window looked out into a forested area. Otherwise, the entire room was empty, besides the small white bed in the left side of my room and a picture of me and my mom at Six Flags. They had drugged me and brought me to the loony bin.

And now you know how I got here, so let's continue. And pray I get out.

I leaned against the wall and held my head in my hands. How long would they keep me here? And if I acted completely normal and did what they said, would they let me out? Why was this happening to *me*?

I suddenly heard something like bottles of glass shattering and a scream that followed shortly after. Whoops. I took a few calming breaths. Stuff like that would happen the whole time I was here unless I learned to control it. And now seemed as good a time as any.

I held the picture of me and Mom and stared at it, concentrating. Usually glass or ceramic broke, so maybe I could crack the glass in the picture. But nothing happened. Perhaps when and if I learned to control my abilities, I'd be able to shatter glass or similar materials just by thinking about it. Kind of how Matilda makes things float with her mind.

I'd been holding that picture for at least forty-five minutes before falling asleep. And succumbing to my dreadful nightmares.

I stood on the main deck of a superyacht that was aflame. Smoke billowed everywhere and everyone on board was hacking. Somehow though, I knew that I had to save them. That I was the only one who could do it.

"Everybody, climb into the lifeboats and get out of here!" I yelled at them all, erupting into a fit of coughing.

Then I ran downstairs, following a desperate plea for help. Black smoke surrounded me, and I searched everywhere. Finally, I came

across a small figure huddled in the corner of the girl's barracks. I ran to it and saw a little girl with brown hair and amber eyes. I recognized her immediately.

We ran to the lifeboats, but before we made it, she tripped. The boards under her were already scorched, rotten, and smoldering. They gave way and she was consumed by the flames. Her entire body smoldering and scorched. I had let Evelyn Colling die. That's right, Ben's little sister.

I woke up crying and shivering. My nightmares were getting worse, and I couldn't prevent them unless I never slept again. Someday I'd go off the deep end with insanity. I couldn't stand seeing those people die at my hands. Die because *I* had failed to save them. I could only imagine who would be next.

My side didn't ache as much as it had when I'd awoken from the torture drugs, but it felt sore, and my ribs were definitely still broken. I looked out the window and saw that it was either late night or early morning because the sky was dark with no sign of a sunrise. But no matter what time it was, I wasn't going back to sleep.

I lay on my bed, waiting for something to happen. Maybe someone would realize I was awake and come to see me. You're probably wondering why I haven't tried the door, well, I have. And it's dead bolted. Plus, there's a security camera in the corner, so even if I did get out, they'd know and come get me. Perhaps give me those awful drugs again.

"Theodore?" I nearly jumped off the bed. Patrick Frass was standing at the entrance of my room. He'd nearly given me a heart attack. "Sorry, didn't mean to frighten you. May I sit?" He walked to my bed and looked to me for an answer.

When I didn't reply he sat down anyway. Then he nodded toward the door and it closed and locked, making a clicking sound. I scooted to the opposite side of the bed and curled into a ball, refusing to make eye contact with Patrick. My defiance didn't last long.

"I'm sure you have lots of questions Teddy, but first I need to explain what you'll be doing here." He made it sound like I'd be staying here forever. I mean, for all I knew, I would be. "First, I'll introduce you to the head of the clinic, Oscar Gilligan. He'll probably ask you some questions, he wants to do your sessions himself. An honor he rarely allows anyone."

That piqued my patience. I lifted my head and looked at him. "How is anything here an honor, Patrick?"

"It's an honor that we're allowing you to be medication free until

further notice, Theodore. And here you'll refer to me as Dr. Frass." He adjusted his shirt collar before continuing. "Tomorrow you'll be shown around, and we'll have a gathering with everyone. We call it Calming Time, we do it for an hour every day. Then you'll be allowed to relax, eat, and go to bed. Of course, you'll be introduced to the doctors who will help you, and the people who wish to know you. Any questions so far?"

"What will *you* be doing?" I asked.

"I have been assigned as your main doctor, aside from Dr. Gilligan, your sessions master. I'll provide you with anything necessary or answer any questions you have, as long as you don't ask absurd questions."

"So basically, you'll be stalking me except when I'm in therapy?"

"If that's how you wish to word it." Patrick looked me over for a moment. "Any rule breaking comes with reprimand, but there are only a few rules, so remember them well. One, you can't attack other patients or doctors. That includes calling them names, hitting them, or anything else that could potentially hurt them in any way. Two, you must be a part of every gathering and must show up to each therapy session. Three, we don't tolerate foolish attempts of escape. And we greatly disapprove of snark. Four, you must do everything on time according to our strict schedules. Understand?"

Yeesh. "Mostly. Just one thing. What happens if you *do* break the rules?"

Dr. Frass narrowed his eyes. "Let's hope you don't find out. Trust me, you'll do well to remember and abide by the rules, Theodore." He leaned forward and clasped his hands in his lap, his signature move. I knew he was about to ask a question. "Did you experience your nightmares tonight?"

I thought I might as well tell the truth since I was already here. "Yeah. This time I saw Evelyn Colling, Ben's little sister. I saw the boards under her feet break away and she fell into the fire. And I couldn't save her, I just watched her die. Why is this happening to me, Dr. Frass?"

"Theodore, your nightmares are likely caused by anxiety, stress, and trauma. Too much schoolwork or worry can easily drive someone over the edge. And your father's death at such a young age... When Dr. Gilligan is through with your first session, he'll likely want you put on medication for pain and delusions. Perhaps for your nightmares as well."

Great, back to my delusions again. And what were the pain meds

for? “Why pain?” I finally asked.

“Surely your ribs are causing you agony?”

“Oh. Right.” In truth, yeah, they were agonizing. Hopefully they’d heal by next week.

Dr. Frass nodded. “I thought so. Now get some sleep, Theodore. Tomorrow you’ll want to be fully rested.”

“What time is it?”

“3:37 a.m. Sleep.”

“I can’t. I’ll wake up from my nightmares.” And I was terrified of who I’d see die next.

He scooted closer to me and placed his hands on my shoulders, looking into my worried eyes. “Stressing over what will happen and who will be next is contributing to the cause of your nightmares, Theodore. You need not worry who will be next because it is simply a dream. Nothing more.”

I dropped my head and shook it. “They aren’t *just* dreams or nightmares. They’re so real, like I’m actually on the sinking ship and those people really die. What if I see Mom again or Ben or someone else? It’s terrible and I can’t prevent it.” Maybe I could clear my mind or something. Or stay awake until I died of exhaustion. That’d be better than seeing people I love die every night.

“Well, we can’t allow you to stay awake all night.”

“It’s morning.”

Dr. Frass sighed. “If you don’t go to sleep, we’ll have no choice but to sedate you. We doctors have your best interests at heart and we need to keep you as healthy as possible. And that means making sure you get enough sleep. So, what will it be Theodore?” He crossed his arms.

Did I really want to be sedated? “Wait. What about all *my* questions?” I asked, purposely stalling sleep.

“I suppose now’s as good a time as any. Ask away.”

“How long do you plan to keep me here?”

“As long as we see fit.”

Well, that could be forever, but I didn’t care. I wanted to know why they had really dragged me to this ward. “I’m not delusional or depressed. Besides, depressed people usually try to commit suicide. Something I’ve never been keen on trying. So why did you really bring me here?”

“The reason we brought you here is because of your nightmares and delusions. Whether you know it or not, or choose to believe it, you are one hundred percent delusional and in denial.”

I really disliked this guy. Maybe I'd figure out tomorrow why they needed me. Or maybe I really was delusional. "One more question. Will I be able to see Mom or Ben while I'm here?"

"Of course, but not for a few days." Dr. Frass stood up and walked in front of the small round window, observing the forest of green. "I'd like you to know exactly what your symptoms are before I leave you." He turned to me, seriousness in those gray eyes. "You suffer from schizophrenia, Theodore. You are delusional and believe you have these powers, both symptoms of the disorder. Lucky for you it wasn't something like lack of emotion."

I couldn't believe they'd diagnosed me with schizophrenia. They really were worse than I'd ever anticipated. Were they willing to do everything in their power just to keep me here? I thought so. And that thought scared me. This whole place scared me.

"Now, go to sleep or we'll sedate you." Dr. frass said, walking toward the door.

"I'll just deal with the nightmares. No sedation needed.

"I'm glad to hear it, Theodore." And just as Dr. Frass was closing the door something broke. It sounded like glass somewhere down the hall. He turned back and narrowed his eyes at me. "Sedate him." Something in his voice sounded...worried. Sad, even.

"Wait, I'll calm down. This place is just so overwhelming. Everything is different and horrible. Please, don't sedate me. I'll control my emotions." I pleaded.

"That's simply not a risk we can take."

The last thing I saw before they forced the sedations upon me was a man dressed in a doctor's outfit closing the door behind him. And then everything went dark.

* * *

I didn't know how long I was out, but it felt like years. When I woke up, I felt dizzy, and it took me a while to remember where I was. What surprised me most was that my nightmares hadn't come. My sleep had been peaceful for the first time since I was five.

When I sat up, I nearly vomited as a wave of nausea passed over me. My head pounded like someone was beating it with a hammer. And my ribs felt like daggers stabbing me. The pain was fresh, but at least I had expected it. Maybe if I asked for ibuprofen, they'd give me some.

I looked at the picture of Mom and me at Six Flags. She had taken me there a little while after Dad had died. Mom tried so hard to

make me happy again, and she had. Not all the way, but enough. Part of me still felt hollow, a place where my father's love belonged. When Dad had died, my heart had broken. And someday I'd make Luther Ditka pay.

Once my anger and sadness flared, the picture popped. The glass protecting the picture shattered all over the floor. Good thing I'd been in my bed, otherwise I would've been covered in glass shards. And, of course, that moment is when Dr. Frass decided to join me.

He was dressed in formal tan pants, a light blue button up, and shiny black shoes. He wore one of those white doctor coats. His tie was gray with mesmerizing geometric shapes. His goal was probably to distract and hypnotize his patients or something. He looked at the glass fragments scattered on the ground, then looked at me, an eyebrow raised.

"It just sort of, shattered. I didn't touch it." I said, standing.

"Things don't just shatter on their own, Theodore. I'll get someone to clean up your mess." He walked to me and grabbed my arm tightly. "Perhaps your condition is worse than I'd anticipated. Let's go."

He pulled me along the hall, which just looked like any hall. Except it had about a gazillion doors and it was at least a mile long, maybe a little less. We turned right at the end and stood in a living place. Leather couches and chairs were in an area by a fireplace. Four tables with straight back dining table chairs sat in their own place. And people, young and old, were crowded everywhere, none of them paying us much attention as we went down another hallway. This one was much shorter than the last and had only one door at the end. An oak door that read: Head Psychiatrist Dr. Oscar Gilligan's Office. And Dr. Frass opened it without knocking and dragged me in. My head throbbed incessantly.

"Dr. Gilligan, this is the boy you requested." The way he said it sounded like he was talking about an inventory item, not a human. It freaked me out.

"Yes, yes. Take a seat, Mr. Bridgeford." Dr. Gilligan said.

Dr. Frass pushed me into a chair in front of Gilligan's desk. I looked around and noticed a theme of oak. A bookshelf of oak sat against the left wall. His desk was made of solid oak with papers strewn across it. A chandelier hung from the ceiling, silver and magnificent. And a huge window framed in oak took up most of the wall behind Dr. Gilligan, who had his hands clasped on the desk in front of him. That seemed to be the thing for doctors around here. If

they did that, I took it to mean things were getting serious.

I turned to Gilligan. His light, bald head actually made him look handsomer. I couldn't imagine him with hair. He seemed tall, but he was sitting down so I couldn't really tell. He wore a pink button up and tan suit. He looked like white Samuel L. Jackson, only younger and more serious. Minus the beard. And he looked, somehow...familiar.

Dr. Frass cleared his throat. "Sir, would you like me to stay?"

"No. Stand outside and wait for the boy. I'll send him out when we're finished." Gilligan answered.

"You're sure?"

"Yes, Patrick. Go."

After Dr. Frass shut the door, Dr. Gilligan turned his attention to me. I was getting anxious, and my ADHD was acting up. I wasn't sure how much longer I could sit still. And my headache seemed to be getting worse by the second.

"I expect Patrick has informed you of your diagnosis, yes?" Gilligan asked.

"Yeah. He said I have schizophrenia. Which, I might add, is completely ridiculous." I said.

"And your symptoms are delusions and belief in imaginary powers. Yes, I've heard all about you, Theodore."

That didn't sound reassuring in the least. "So, what am I supposed to be doing? Showing you how insane I am?"

"No, no. I'll just be asking you a few questions to assess how mentally damaged you are. Simple."

Yeah, right. "Okay."

"Do you believe that you are schizophrenic, Theodore?" Dr. Gilligan asked.

I didn't hesitate. "Of course not."

"And these nightmares you have, what do you suppose causes them?"

I had to think about that one. I guess my anxiety and stress could be the cause of them, but I wasn't positive. If I was completely honest, I believe when Dad died it scared me. I believe it really is survivor's guilt, even though I wasn't there to see my dad die. But I still strongly believe that it has something to do with Dad's death.

"Well?"

"Oh. I suppose it has something to do with my father's death. They started when he died, ten years ago." I finally replied, wringing my hands, and sliding in my chair.

"And they haven't stopped since?"

I sighed and shook my head, remembering the sedation. It would be awesome if I didn't have to do that ever again. I think my head was about to spontaneously combust from the awful medication.

"Right. And you believe you have these abilities?" Dr. Gilligan asked.

"Yes. If I get really upset, then things happen. Usually glass breaks, and more if I'm extremely angry or sad. Other things can happen too, like trees falling, but that's rare. I can't control it well right now, but I hope I can learn. And when I do, I'm breaking out of here and never coming back."

"Has it happened since you've been here?"

"Thrice."

"Interesting." Did they all have to say that? "You can go, Theodore. But you'll want to take this." He handed me a bottle of ibuprofen.

"Thanks, Dr. Gilligan."

"My pleasure. Oh, and I'm sure one of our doctors can rebandage that for you." He nodded toward my ribs.

"Okay. See ya." I looked back before closing the door and saw Dr. Gilligan smiling and going through some paperwork.

* * *

Dr. Frass led me back to my room, which I was thankful for because I really needed to sit down. When he opened the door, I practically collapsed on my bed. The whiteness of my room was worsening my headache. Dr. Frass sat next to me and looked me over.

"Are you feeling alright?" he asked. And he genuinely sounded sincere.

I groaned. "Yeah, peachy. Besides my terrible headache and home sickness."

"Yes, perhaps we gave you too much sedation. You were under for 22 hours. And as for homesickness, well, you've just got to wait a little longer."

"How 'bout taking me home now?"

"That would be impossible. Theodore, we haven't even begun with you yet."

Yikes. That sounded like I was some sort of lab experiment. I stared at the ibuprofen in my hand. Were they helping me or sucking up to me?

"You know, that will help with your headache. And I'll talk to a specialist for your ribs."

I looked at him, disliking him more every minute. “How can I trust any of the medicine you give me? I haven’t forgotten the car ride.”

“You must understand that was necessary. We couldn’t risk you trying anything foolish. Attempting an escape, for instance.”

“Well, I’m not taking anything unless you force it down my throat or into my system.” I tossed the ibuprofen on the floor, but immediately regretted it.

My head felt like a thousand boulders were crushing it. It was awful. I groaned and bent over, holding my head. Then I retched, but my headache didn’t cease, it intensified. And I realized I hadn’t eaten anything since I was taken to the loony bin.

“Please, I’ll take the medication. Just make it stop.” I cried.

I felt a sharp prick in my arm, and almost instantly my headache lessened. It didn’t completely stop, but most of the pressure and pain vanished. I took a deep breath and raised my head. A young woman was standing in my room now, holding a syringe.

“Thank you so much.” I said.

“You’re most welcome, Teddy. We don’t usually allow our patients to be in so much pain. I was simply doing my job.”

“Theodore, this is Dr. Driggs. She’ll help you with the medication bit. Oh, and she already knows who you are.” Dr. Frass said.

Great, don’t they say the more the merrier? Well, not in this case folks. “What am I doing here?” I muttered.

“You’re schizophrenic, Teddy. Your symptoms are too severe to allow you to stay at home.” Dr. Driggs said. I hadn’t meant for anyone to hear that. Oh well.

I sighed. “Where to now?”

“First we’ll get your ribs rebandaged, then we’ll give you a tour.”

“Who’s doing the bandaging?” I didn’t like the idea of anyone here touching me, much less dressing my wound.

“Dr. Kolter. He’s the one who sedated you. And he’ll help with any of your future injuries.” Dr. Driggs said that like it was a good thing, but I already didn’t like Dr. Kolter. I mean, who would like someone that forced sedation in their system? Exactly, nobody.

* * *

“Hello, Teddy. I’m Dr. Kolter. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” He held out his hand, but I didn’t shake it.

“You’ve already met me, or have you forgotten the sedation?” I asked.

He dropped his hand. “Yes, I’m very sorry about that. But I did as I was told.” He looked nervous, like if he said the wrong thing he’d be punished. “Now, let’s have a look at your ribs. I’ll need to take an x-ray to assess the damage. Then we’ll begin.”

“I thought this was the insane asylum, not a hospital.” I said.

“Well, we have what we need for everything and anyone. And clinics for the mental are a type of hospital.” Dr. Frass replied. Dr. Driggs had left us on the way here, after cleaning up the mess in my room. She had said she was getting something for me. I didn’t think that sounded like a good thing.

“Take your shirt off Teddy.” Dr. Kolter said.

“Can’t I just lift it up?” I was looking at all the other people in my vicinity.

“It will be much easier for me to work if your shirt is off.”

I reluctantly did as I was told and revealed the bandages covering my torso. Dr. Kolter unwrapped my bandages and stared at my bruised side. It was green and purple, and some areas looked like blood, red spots everywhere. And I was in agony now that I was paying full attention to my ribs.

“I’m going to press on them and see how many are broken.” Dr. Kolter said.

That sounded painful and like a terrible idea. “Won’t the x-ray tell you that?” I asked.

“Yes, but I need to see how much pain you’re in and how much they’ve healed since the initial breakage. And I need to see how they move when you breathe.”

“Okay. I’m ready.” I had no idea what I was getting myself into.

Dr. Kolter pulled on some latex gloves and gently pressed where the bruising was. When he pressed down on the middle, I gasped from the pain and stepped back.

“That’s definitely broken. Let’s take the x-rays now.” I said.

“I haven’t finished yet, Teddy. That was only one broken or cracked rib, there could still be more.”

“Yeah, well, once again that’s what the x-ray machine was made for.”

Dr. Frass pushed me to Kolter. “Let him do it, Theodore. It won’t be as bad now that you’re expecting it.”

That logic made about as much sense as living on Jupiter.

Dr. Kolter resumed his torture, starting where he’d ended last time. And once again it was excruciating. I winced every time he pressed on my broken ribs, which seemed to be about three, and shut

my eyes tightly. Finally, he stopped. And I exhaled in relief, which was like inhaling daggers.

"I believe one of your ribs is broken and two are merely cracked. They don't appear to be damaging your lungs, but I still need to take an x-ray."

He led me to a table, and I lied down, my ribs killing me. Don't worry, it's just a figure of speech. I then watched as a white machine was rolled next to my bed. Dr. Kolter messed with a few things on the x-ray machine, and it scanned my torso. It didn't take long to finish.

I sat up and Dr. Kolter showed me the x-ray on a little tablet thing. Two of my ribs were cracked on the right side and one was broken. The rest looked fine.

"How long have they been broken?" he asked.

"Probably about two weeks." I said, staring at the awesome x-ray machine.

"And on a scale of one to ten, how much pain are you in?"

"Probably eight." The machine had like a kazillion buttons.

"Good." I didn't think that sounded so good. "I'll reapply bandages and give you something for the pain. Actually, you'll need to wait three hours before you take anything because of the pain medicine you took for your headache."

"You're probably right."

"Stop saying probably."

It took everything in me to resist saying, "That's probably a good idea." But I didn't want to know what happened if you disobeyed the doctor.

I watched as Dr. Kolter wrapped gauze around my bruised rib cage, resisting the urge to vomit or cry out in pain. It felt like a leather belt studded with spikes was being wrapped around my stomach. If you can imagine that, then you have a pretty good idea of how I felt. And a pretty scary imagination.

"That should do it. They'll be good as new by next week." Dr. Kolter said.

"Thanks." I said, pulling my shirt on.

"Just don't do anything that will increase the pain and try not to fall or get hit on that side. And Dr. Driggs will meet with you later to give you medicine for the pain."

Every time someone said that I recalled the car ride, medicine *for* the pain. I didn't know if I'd ever trust any medicine again. Or anyone who said those words. I think Dr. Frass scarred me for life.

"Time for the tour?" I asked.

"Yeah, but you can rest first, if you like." Dr. Frass replied.

"That sounds like a very tempting idea." I definitely needed some sleep, nightmares or not.

* * *

"Teddy, I've got something for you." When Dr. Driggs sat on my bed, I didn't lift my head from my hands. "I brought medication for your pain and delusions. Just take one of each. Dr. Frass will be here soon to give you a tour of the clinic. Get some rest." And she left me alone with my scattered and insane thoughts. I think this place was causing my mentalness. And yes, that's a word. Deal with it.

I'd be stuck in this loony bin forever. They'd keep me here for as long as they could. But soon I'd be able to control my powers, the powers that aren't just my imagination. I'd destroy this whole place and hunt down Luther Ditka. During all my thinking and musing, I failed to notice Dr. Frass leaning against the door.

"Theodore, it's time to go." He said gently.

I raised my head and looked out the window. The trees were waving wildly in the wind. The sky brilliant blue. It must be midday or morning. Sorry about all that alliteration, it just seemed to fit. Anyhow, I turned to face Dr. Frass.

"You know, I didn't get much rest at all. Can't we postpone the tour so I can sleep?" I said.

"No." He pulled me up. "It's time to go Theodore. We left you in here for five hours, it's your own fault you decided not to rest." Dr. Frass headed for the door.

"Wait. Can I at least change clothes and shower?"

Patrick sighed. "Very well. There's a bathroom directly across the hall. And extra garments under your bed. I expect you in the headmaster's office by three o'clock. That's one hour."

"Alright. Thanks."

* * *

I took a wonderful shower, one of life's many glories. Then I pulled on some clothes that weren't stark white. I wore a gray button up shirt, and tan formal pants. I think I totally pulled off the handsome gentlemanly vibe.

I walked down the mile long hall full of numbered doors and turned right at the end. Just as I had when I first went to Dr. Gilligan's office. While I was walking toward the short hallway that

had Gilligan's door, I realized that the living area was empty but for one person. An old lady sat in a leather chair, muttering to herself, and looking terrified. I decided to take my chances with her.

"Hello, I'm Teddy." I said.

She briefly glanced at me, then turned her head toward an empty chair. "See? I knew he'd be here, Berny. That wild boy. I told you. He's after me, Berny."

This lady was clinically insane. She was talking to no one. Literally muttering to an empty chair she called Berny. Then the realization hit me at full blast. She was schizophrenic. Isn't that what people with schizophrenia did, talk to people only they could see? I can't believe Dr. Frass had diagnosed *me* with schizophrenia.

"Berny, he's just standing there. Why's he doing that Berny? Help me!" she suddenly said, waking me from my thoughts.

I took that as my cue to leave. I walked down the hall and knocked on Dr. Gilligan's door. Almost immediately, Dr. Frass opened the door. I stepped into the oak office and stood in front of Gilligan's desk.

"I thought I said an hour, not an hour and a half." Dr. Frass said, staring daggers at me.

This was like going to the principal's office, something I had plenty of experience with. "I...I got a bit sidetracked." I said.

"By what?"

"I spoke with a schizophrenic lady." Dr. Frass crossed his arms. "That's all, honestly."

"Leave him be, Patrick." Dr. Gilligan said, turning to me. "Is the medication helping, Teddy?"

I hadn't taken anything that Dr. Driggs had brought me. My ribs weren't bothering me that much and I wasn't delusional, so they didn't seem necessary. I wondered if I'd get in trouble for not taking them.

"Yeah, it's helping tons." I lied.

"Hmmm. Even the Benadryl?" Dr. Gilligan asked.

"Yes." It came out more like a question than a statement.

"Interesting." He leaned forward and clasped his hands. At this point, I was pretty sure the clasping hand thing was some kind of impulsive disorder that every doctor here had. "Teddy, we didn't give you any Benadryl. We gave you ibuprofen and lurasidone. Where is the medicine?"

Busted. I sighed. "In my room."

"Good. I need to show you something. Follow me." Dr. Gilligan got

up and strode to the door. And he was tall, as I had suspected. I mean, like, six three.

"Wait. What about those meeting things and the tour? I thought I was going to..." I racked my brain to remember what Dr. Frass had called it. "...Calming Time."

"Things have changed, Teddy. You're a special case. I need you to come with me."

This guy was scaring me. "What are you going to do?"

"Run some tests. Study the readings. Research. Train you." Dr. Gilligan pulled me out the door. "Now, come on."

I followed doctors Frass and Gilligan down three halls, all the same. Doors everywhere. We turned right at the end of the third hall, went down some stairs, and stopped in an empty room. The room was made entirely of metal. No windows anywhere. The only strange thing was the smell, like a combo of iodine and chlorine. It smelled like a laboratory or hospital. Both, actually.

"This is where you wanted to take me? It doesn't really stand to amaze." I said.

"This is just the disguise." Dr. Frass replied.

He walked over to one of the walls and slid his hand across it, like he was scanning it or something. Then I heard creaking noises, metal being grinded or moved. I stood in amazement as I watched lab machinery and computers be pushed out of the wall. The ground opened and more equipment arose. It was like one of those movies where the secret lab is underground, and you've got to pull a lever to get to it. Only this time, you pulled a lever, and *it came to you*. Pure epicness. Or maybe I've just seen too many movies.

"This place is...wow." I was completely stunned by the technology before me.

Huge computers were in the back of the room. White machines that did who knew what were lined against the walls. There were security cameras, bright lights, and wires. Tables were placed around the room with glass containers sitting on them. Small computers sat on three of the tables. Swivel chairs were at each table and some in the middle of the room. Microscopes sat with the glass vials. And everything looked so...techy.

"Welcome to C.D.P, Teddy. Counteract the Demonizado Payasos. Patrick is going to run some tests on you, so we'll know exactly what's wrong with you. Then we'll train you and help you find Luther Ditka. We want to take down these terrorists as much as you do." Dr. Gilligan said.

"Wait, what are the tests for?" I asked.

"To see why you have powers." Dr. Frass said.

"So, you've been helping me from the get-go?" This didn't make any sense to me. "Why did you drug me? Twice, no less. And why not just tell me the truth from the beginning?"

"We had to convince you that you were insane. If you believed you were mental, so would everyone else you know. I'm sorry we had to use those pain enhancers, but it was the only way to bring you here without you realizing where here is. And we couldn't just blurt out who we were, nobody can know we exist. Our entire resistance would be compromised."

That made some sense, but I was still skeptical. "What do you have against the Demonized Clowns?"

"Everyone here, Kolter, Driggs, Frass, and I have lost loved ones to this terrorist group. They're insane and someone needs to end them. Also, who doesn't have something against terrorists?"

These people wanted me to believe that they'd been trying to help me from the beginning. That was a lot to wrap my head around. They didn't act like they wanted my help. And why did I, of all people, have to be the one they wanted?

"Okay. Where do I come in?" I asked.

"Teddy, I know this is a lot to take in, but you've got to trust us. Think about it. If we were really doctors, then why not leave you in your room? If we were really doctors, we'd be forcing you to take those drugs. The reason we waited until now to show you is because I had to be sure you were ready. And your rebelliousness proves to me that you are." Gilligan said.

I walked to one of the swivel chairs and sat down. "That doesn't answer my question."

"We need you because of your abilities. We want to train you, but you need to understand first. We're going to help you hunt down Ditka, but he must be turned over to the authorities. We won't allow you to bring him any harm. Once we have Ditka, we'll have the rest of them."

"Is Ditka the leader?"

"Yes. Which is why you especially can't kill him. If you do, invaluable information will be lost forever."

Like they could stop me. "He killed my father. He deserves to suffer."

Mr. Gilligan knelt in front of me, a serious sincerity in his eyes. "Teddy, have you ever read the Bible?"

"Yeah, Dad used to read some to me every night."

He nodded. "Then you know Luke 6:31. 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.' Would you want someone to kill you for revenge?" I shook my head. "I thought not. You would want to be forgiven. 'Do not seek revenge or bear a grudge against anyone among your people, but love your neighbor as yourself.' Leviticus 19:18. Teddy, holding grudges can be toxic, consuming. You must forgive. If you don't, you'll be acting on anger instead of love or rationality."

He really knew his verses. And I knew those verses too. I had memorized every verse Dad had ever taught me. Those two were some of his favorites, he'd made me recite them every day. I loved my dad. But Luther Ditka had taken him from me, and Mr. Gilligan expected me to simply forgive him. I didn't know if I could do that. He murdered my father in cold blood.

I looked at Gilligan intently, about to say something I wasn't sure was true. "I'll try my best to contain my anger and sadness, Mr. Gilligan."

"I'm glad to hear you say that Teddy. And there's something I must tell you before we begin the training and hunting. Something I know you've been waiting to hear for ten years." Mr. Oscar Gilligan's eyes filled with tears. "Don't you recognize me? I know it's been a long time, but something must be familiar."

When I'd first seen Mr. Gilligan in his office, something about him had struck me as familiar, but I hadn't known what. And looking at him now, his bald head and warm smile, a startling realization passed over me. One of the things I'd remembered most about my father was his smile, and Mr. Gilligan's smile was the same as the one engraved in my memory.

"D-Dad?" My voice was barely audible. And my eyes were full of joyful tears.

"My boy." I collapsed into his strong, warm embrace. The same one that had held me ten years ago. "When I was shot by Luther, the wound was fatal. But it hadn't killed me. If you'll remember, I was cremated. A cat's ashes had represented me. Patrick found me and fixed me up." He turned to Patrick and smiled. "Then we began our resistance. We researched everything there was to research about Ditka and his terrorists. And when I thought the time was right, I brought you to me."

I pulled away and looked into my father's eyes. I couldn't believe this was happening, it was simply too good to be true. But I knew in my heart that my father was smiling at me, alive and well. "What

about Mom? Why did you just leave us alone?"

"I know I put you and your mother through horrible things that no five-year-old should have to experience with his devastated mother. But I did what I thought was best to protect my family and others from Luther. Teddy, I'm so sorry. I should've at least sent a letter."

"Dad, it's fine. Mom is okay. I'm okay. And you're okay. Everything is perfect. 'Let all that you do be done with love.' 1 Corinthians 16:14. And that's just exactly what you did, Dad." Something about this felt off. Something didn't seem to click, like something terrible was about to happen. But I'm sure I was just being paranoid.

Looking back on it, maybe I shouldn't have dissed my feeling of unease.

"I'm just so glad you and your mother are safe." We embraced again. "Now, I believe training is in order."

* * *

For the next month I trained. My dad and Patrick taught me to concentrate and direct. If I concentrated on a certain object, usually something glass, I could direct my anger at it and shatter the glass.

The first few days I just stared at glass, memorizing every detail on it. The scratches, extra clear areas, and what it was reflecting. Supposedly, if I could memorize it perfectly, I'd be able to break it without seeing it. Simply by imagining it. I thought it was a long shot, but Dad and Patrick wanted me to be as prepared as humanly possible.

After that, I began to focus my energy into actually breaking the object. I had to stare at it and think of something that made me angry or sad. Usually I thought about my dad's 'death'. Man, I was so glad he was alive. If only Mom were here to see him, she'd burst into tears and hug him. Anyway, once I broke the glass, I had to do it again. I broke like fifty jars every day.

Dad and Patrick were convinced that my powers would be of use when I came face to face with Luther, but I wasn't so sure. I mean, what could broken glass do against a gun? But I kept training regardless. They said that once I had the shattering part down, they'd teach me how to make other things happen. Like the books that flew off the shelf and the tree that nearly killed Fredrick Higgins and his posse. Now that could be of some use.

And even with all the training and distracting machines, my mind was always on Mom and Ben. I wished with all my heart that

they could be here. Mom would be so proud, and Ben would be amazed and say something intelligent, like, "Wow! Focusing your negative energy to objects and shattering them! Dude!" Maybe a little more science-y. I just wanted them here for moral support and because I missed them so much.

* * *

I was relaxing in one of the swivel chairs, taking a break after shattering thirty glasses and making rocks shoot like bullets. Even though I'd been training for over a month now, it still exhausted my energy. After about fifty glasses, I was completely worn out. But I was getting stronger. And more focused despite my ADHD.

"Teddy, come here." Dad called from one of the computers.

While Patrick trained me, Dad did research to try and find the location of Luther Ditka and his gang. And vice versa. So far, neither of them had discovered anything they didn't already know. And sometimes Ms. Driggs and Mr. Kolter would show up to train me.

"What is it?" I asked, standing by my dad's side.

"Oh, nothing about the location, but someone's here who'd like very much to see you." He winked at me. "I've already spoken with her."

Her. That was all the confirmation I needed. "Where is she?"

"I've got to work. Patrick, please escort Teddy to our visitor."

"Of course." Patrick smiled at me. "Right this way."

He led me up some stairs, and into my old white room. But it wasn't white anymore. It looked like any ordinary dorm room. A twin bed, huge window, and my things cluttered everywhere. I guess I should explain.

You see, after I'd been training for a few weeks, Dad and Patrick decided it would be best to tell me where we really were. The whole time I'd been here, I had never realized that I was in my school building. Clearfield High. I was just as surprised as you probably are now, but it made sense. This place had everything they needed and more. They had disguised it as a hospital to keep me from knowing where we were. And that lady with schizophrenia? Yeah, she wasn't really schizophrenic. She's actually a nice lady named Bertha, and she makes some killer cookies. Man, they're amazing. Mouthwatering...

Back to reality.

I looked around and saw Mom standing in front of the window. Her hair was grayer than when I'd left her, and she looked frailer. But she was beautiful, nonetheless. Patrick closed the door and left us

alone. And when she turned at the sound of the shutting door, I couldn't take it any longer. I collapsed on my bed and broke down. And Mom held me and ran her fingers through my hair.

I'd gone months without a mother, without *my* mother. It had been hurting me so much that I was with Dad, and she wasn't. That we could be together but weren't. And my grief could no longer be bottled up. It poured out like an erupting volcano.

When I could speak, I said, "I missed you so much. And Ben. This whole time I've been here with Dad, having a great time. I never imagined how you must have felt. You were all alone. I'm so sorry Mom. I'm so sorry."

She brushed my hair from my forehead. "Teddy, you have nothing to apologize for. Your father explained everything to me. I'm glad you spent time with him alone. And I've missed you too, sweety. I love you, more than words can say." She kissed my forehead.

I told her everything we'd been doing over the past months. My training and improving. The research on Ditka. Our plan. And she listened with her arms around me. We were finally together again.

"And we're going to find him and turn him over to the police."

Mom looked at me, smiling. But I saw something else in her expression: worry. "Is that your plan, Teddy? Or did your father tell you that?"

What was she talking about? "What?"

"Are you really just going to give up Ditka that easily? After everything he did?"

"Well, yeah. Forgiveness and justice are always the answer. Right?"

"Teddy, you don't sound so sure of this plan." She looked me in the eyes. "Are you considering killing him?"

Yes. "No! Why would you think that?" I asked.

"I know you, honey. Better than you might think. Certainly better than Victor. And I know that you never give up so easily. So, without argument."

"Mom, I'm not going to do anything like that."

"Like what?"

"I'm not going to...hurt him."

"Teddy, look at me."

I turned my head to look at my mother. She knew that I was going to at least try to kill him, but I wasn't going to encourage her suspicions. And I couldn't blatantly lie to her either.

"Now, tell me you're not going to kill Luther Ditka or any of his

partners. No matter what."

I stared at her. Like I'd say *that*.

"Teddy, promise me. Please."

"Mom, I...I can't."

"Yes, you can. You're not a killer, honey. Think of their families. Their children, wives, and husbands. God will punish them accordingly. You mustn't interfere. Teddy, don't take their lives, it's wrong. Sinful."

Well, you can't argue with that. I sighed. "Okay, I won't kill anyone. I promise." Though I didn't know how long I could keep that promise. Would I end up being a murderer?

"Thank you. That's all I needed to hear."

I didn't meet my mother's eyes, for fear she may recognize something in my expression. Alright, listen. You've got to understand that I love my parents, really. I don't like lying and I'm terrible at it, but the truth is, I honestly didn't know if I was lying or not. And that's a scary thought.

"Theodore."

I opened my eyes and saw Patrick standing over me. I sat up and rubbed my eyes. I didn't remember falling asleep, but I guess I was more fatigued than I'd thought. And where was Mom?

"How did you sleep?"

"Great, I guess." Then I realized something amazing. "My nightmares. I didn't have nightmares."

Patrick smiled and pulled me up. "That's good to know, Theodore. Since your family is back together, you shouldn't be having them anymore."

"I don't believe it."

"Well, you'd better start believing it because you've got other things to think about now." I followed him down the age long hall. "We've discovered something you'll want to see. And Rebecca is waiting for you in the laboratory."

We walked down the halls again and down the stairs. The futuristic room was still stunning. It made me speechless every time I saw it. The computers, machines, and other technology that I didn't know the names of. And surrounding one of the computers were Mom, Dad, Ms. Driggs, and Mr. Kolter. They appeared to be staring at something.

"Teddy! You need to see this!" Ms. Driggs yanked me over to the screen and pointed.

The computer screen showed a map of some place not far from Clearfield High. I saw roads and highways. Names of streets and

avenues. Buildings and houses. And on the bottom left corner was a red dot. The location of Ditka. I looked closely and the words stunned me. I was filled with joy, anger, and fear. The location read: Washington Avenue, Ogden, Utah. And Luther Ditka was hiding out in an empty clothes shop.

I looked around; everyone was staring at me. I sat down in a swivel chair and held my head in my hands, not wanting to make eye contact with any of them. Did they expect me to go today? Right now? Was I to go alone without any weapons?

"'So I say to you, ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you.'" Dad said.

"Luke 11:9. I know, but it's just so...so *much*. I don't know if I can do it. Why can't you and Patrick go?"

Patrick chimed in. "Because you have powers and you're an innocent adolescent, Theodore. They probably won't kill you unless you do something extremely stupid."

What an encouragement. "Probably?"

"Well, I can't guarantee anything. I can only make educated guesses."

"That's not helping." I raised my head and looked at Dad. "Can you come with me? Please?"

"I won't be able to show myself unless things get heated, but I can follow you at a distance. In disguise. If they recognize me, they'll shoot to kill."

I hugged my dad and whispered in his ear, "'You are my hiding place; you shall protect me from trouble and surround me with songs of deliverance.' Psalm 32:7."

He smiled at me and nodded.

"When do we leave?" I asked.

"In a fortnight." I stared at Patrick blankly. "Two weeks."

* * *

I was covered in sweat after practicing knocking down small trees. The effort of just causing three little trees to fall drained me like crazy. I passed out the first twelve times because it sapped all my energy. No pun intended...well, actually, it *was* intended. Literally in every way.

Anyway, I was lying on my bed when I heard a knock on the door. And instantly, I began wondering who it was and what they wanted. Was it Patrick coming to tell me we had to leave early? Was Mom coming to tell me goodbye again? Or Dad saying a Bible verse

and then leaving me and Mom alone? Or was I just being paranoid? Probably the last option.

"Come in." I finally said.

It was Patrick. He opened the door and sat next to me on my bed. Then he did the thing they all did; he clasped his hands. Uh-oh. Something bad must have happened. Man, I hated it when they did that.

"Theodore, I have some really bad news, some bad news, and some okay news. Which would you like to hear first?"

Wow. Not even any good news. That's depressing. Well, don't they say to have the bad news first so that you end up happy? "I guess the really bad news."

"Alright. Victor is missing. We've searched the entire building and surrounding areas for him, but he's nowhere to be seen. I'm so sorry."

Great, just splendid. I got my dad back and now he's gone again. Never a dull moment.

"We believe he was kidnapped by the Demonized Clowns. Theodore, I really am so sorry."

"The bad news?" I asked, trying to control myself.

"The bad news is that we don't know where he is. And we've lost the location of Luther Ditka."

There's no way the okay news could be worse than what I'd already heard. "And?"

"Well, there's a message from Luther. It's for you."

"Like, a letter or what?"

"No. A recording. If you'll come with me, I think we can track it to where they're hiding."

"You haven't listened to it yet?"

"No. We were given strict orders not to listen unless you were with us."

I stood up. "Then what are we waiting for?"

We walked down the halls and down the stairs for what felt like the millionth time. When we were inside the lab, I could feel the somberness in the air. It was extremely palpable. My heart sank lower in my stomach when I saw Mom. Her eyes were red and puffy from crying. When she saw me though, she smiled. I hugged her and went to Mr. Kolter's side. He was waiting in the swivel chair at an empty table, but for the phone. The message was likely a voicemail or something.

"Okay, when I tell you, pick up the phone and answer it. Either it's a voicemail or Luther is actually calling. All we know is that *you*

have to answer it."

He handed a headset to Patrick and put one on himself. They did some stuff with the computer, and I just watched. I waited. What did Ditka want with me and my father? Was he trying to lure me to him? Guess I'd find out soon enough.

"Ready?" Mr. Kolter asked me.

I nodded.

"Good. Answer the phone when I give a thumbs up. Patrick and I will be listening in, so you have nothing to worry about. And if it's really him, keep him talking as long as you can."

"Right."

I waited for the signal and answered the phone. A gravelly voice spoke into my ear, sending shivers down my spine.

"We have your father, Theo. He's already escaped us once and he won't do it again. Unless..." There was a pause.

"Unless what?" I demanded.

"You turn yourself over to us in exchange for your father. We know you've been training and searching for us, but if you don't show up in one hour... Well, you won't have much of a father left."

"Who are you?"

"Please. You know who I am, Theo. And some of your school mates are working for me as well." The voice laughed, a sound like thunder clapping.

"You're a monster. Why are you doing this?"

"We all have our motives, Mr. Bridgeford. And mine is revenge." I could hear the snarl in his voice. "Now, if you don't show up to your house in one hour, bye bye to Daddy."

"Wait, what are you gonna do to him?"

"Anything and everything..... If you fail to show up."

The line went dead.

* * *

"Teddy, you can't go. They aren't going to let Victor go even if they have you. Please." Mom begged.

I climbed into the backseat of Patrick's silver BMW. "Mom, they want me, not Dad. I must go. It's his only chance."

"But someone else can go instead of you! Teddy *please*! You don't have to do this!"

"What if I'm the only one who can?" I shut the door and Patrick drove off. Toward my home. A place I thought would always be safe. Boy, was I wrong.

* * *

We drove past my school, past the local shop, a bakery. It would take much less than an hour to get to my house, since it was only ten blocks from the school. But I was getting extremely anxious and scared. I couldn't keep my hands and feet still. My ribs were fully healed, but it felt like I could hardly breathe. I wasn't scared, I was *horrified*.

"Theodore, who was it on the phone? He said you knew who he was."

I looked out the window, we were nearly there. "I-I don't know. Maybe he just said that." Nothing he'd said was familiar. Well...

"Alright."

I was thankful he didn't ask any more questions. I'd had enough questions for a lifetime. If that was even possible.

Patrick pulled to a stop in the apartment parking lot, but neither of us got out. My room was on floor five, room 123. It was easy to remember. But we waited until the hour was nearly up.

"Listen, I know you're scared. I've been there, Theodore. This Luther guy murdered both my parents and sister. He's nothing short of devils spawn." Patrick turned to face me. "When you go in there, remember 1 Thessalonians 5:15." He tried for a smile, but it looked sad. "I'll call the police as soon as I can, and we'll come get you. Okay?"

"Okay." I climbed over the seat and hugged Patrick tight. "Thanks for everything."

I climbed out of the car and walked toward the apartment building door. Nothing seemed strange or suspicious yet. But you never know, seven out of ten people in there could be working for Ditka, and I'd never know.

When I went inside, I immediately noticed the absence of human beings. Nobody was eating at the diner, no one was checking in, and nobody was at the counter. I wrapped my arms around myself and sulked to the elevator. And again, not one person was waiting for the elevators. And when they came up, empty. Something was definitely wrong here.

I pressed the number five button and leaned against the wall in the corner. The elevator seemed to go excruciatingly slow. It felt like it was pausing every ten seconds. And being in there alone was dreadful. But even more so when I wasn't alone...

I heard a sound like metal clicking, the cocking of a gun. A tall man in a classic tux held a gun to my chest. He gripped my arm

tightly and smiled a hideous smile.

"Just to ensure you don't think about running away."

Great, this Luther fellow really thought of everything, huh. I looked around the inside of the elevator for anything glass, but everything was metal or wood. Not my specialties. But maybe there was glass nearby, and if I could imagine it shattering outside the elevator door, would it? It was a long shot and a small distraction at best, but maybe it would be long enough.

And you may ask, "Why ditch the guy when he's just gonna lead you to Luther?" Well, it's simple really. Who wants a gun pointing at their chest, just waiting for the kill shot? Yeah, I thought so.

I focused on lots of glass things: windows, cups, vials. I imagined them being broken and scattered around the elevator exit. I concentrated on something that provoked me, this guy with a gun. Then I kept imagining it, over and over again. But I never heard anything shatter, I just prayed it would work. And it was draining my energy by the second.

"Let's go, Carrots." He pushed me against the wall and held the gun to my back.

Wait, wait, wait. What did he call me? Only three people in existence would ever call me that. Fredrick Higgins and his buddies, William Bouvard and Silvester Dort. And hadn't Luther said something about my school friends working for him? I couldn't believe it.

"Fred? Is that you?" I asked.

"Ha! So, you finally understand, eh, Carrots? Good. Luther will be proud."

"Where are Willy and Vest?"

"With your daddy. And don't forget I have a gun."

Finally, the elevator came to a stop. And I had never been so happy to see shattered glass in my life. Millions of glass shards covered the carpet. It was exactly the distraction I needed.

I kicked Fred in the shin and ran. The glass crunched under my feet noisily, but nothing could stop me now. Except, it could. Fredrick fired his gun and hit me right in the thigh. I yelled and fell to the floor.

It felt like a burning hot rod of metal was put into my leg and left there. It felt like someone was continuously poking me with a really sharp needle, but not stabbing me. Just poking. The pain was crippling. Blood was soaking my pant leg. And my vision was blurry. My breathing grew labored.

"Thought you'd try escaping, Carrots? Not on my watch! Get up!"

I stood, but my wounded leg couldn't hold my weight. I collapsed

to the ground and groaned. This was a thousand times worse than the torture medicine. A thousand times worse than any pain I've ever felt before.

"I said, GET UP!" Fred pointed his gun at me again.

"I...can't. Please, it...it hurts."

"If you can't stand, then crawl!" His voice echoed down a long tunnel.

I was dimly aware of Fredrick's gun on my back as I crawled to my apartment door. I was sure that I wouldn't make it to the door before passing out. The pain was agonizing. Broken ribs were like a minor burn compared to being shot. My entire body shook, from fear or pain I wasn't sure. Perhaps both.

"Keep going! We're almost there, Carrots."

Where were the police and Patrick? Where was everyone who was supposed to live here? Why hadn't any of them come out after hearing the gunshot? What the heck was going on?

"Now, stand up and open the door." Fredrick barked.

I leaned against the wall, my body wet with sweat and numb with pain. "I told you...I can't stand...stand up."

He yanked me up and shoved me against the wall. "*Open the door.*" He emphasized each word as he spoke them.

When he let me go, I slid down the wall. I heard him yelling at me, but I couldn't understand any of it. I was drifting far away. I felt him dragging me through the door just before blacking out.

* * *

I drifted in and out of consciousness. I saw Fred talking to Silvester and William once. Then I saw who I guess was Luther standing over me. And the third time I saw someone hidden in the shadows, leaning against a wall. Whoever they were, they didn't seem able to move.

Finally, I was fully conscious. But that wasn't much better than being under. Actually, it was worse. The pain of my leg hit me at full blast, and I gasped. My clothes were completely soaked through with sweat. And I was strapped down in a chair, my wrists and ankles zip-tied to the arm rests and legs of the chair.

"Good, you're awake." A man dressed all Dapper Dan walked into the light. "I'm genuinely surprised you didn't find out who I was sooner. Take a good look while you still can, Theo."

Take a good look I did. His tan suit and red shirt added to his handsomeness. His hair was slicked to the right side, dark brown and shining. And his beard was cleanly cut. He was my professor. My

psychology teacher, Professor Lillykins. What did he have against me?

"Professor Lillykins. But...how...why?" The pain in my leg was sucking my energy, physically and mentally.

"Yes. Luther Lillykins Ditka. You see, if I went by Luther you'd know. And the same goes for Ditka. So I had to go by my middle name. And you, Mr. Bridgeford. You ruined it all." He pressed on my wound.

And that was enough. It was unbearable. I screamed.

"Please! I'll do whatever it is you want! Just let Dad go. Please, stop." I cried.

He moved his hand away, and I saw the blood on it. "Ahh, yes. Victor." He made some signal with his hand and Silvester pushed my father next to me.

He looked terrible. His forehead was slick with sweat. His eyes were bloodshot. His hands bloody. And he looked about seventy-eight years old.

"What did you do to him?" I asked, my voice weak and choked with pain and despair.

"Whatever we had to for the information we needed. But he's of no use to us now. Only you are Theo."

"What are you going to do?"

"Kill him."

Luther pulled out a gun, cocked it, and pointed it at my father's head.

"Wait! Just let him go. You said if I came, you'd let him go. Please. You promised. PLEASE!"

Luther pulled the trigger. I turned my head away as tears rolled down my cheeks. My father was *really* dead now. Never coming back. He was gone.

"Now then." He pressed the point of his gun on my wound. "You're going to suffer like Ariana did. You put her in pain, ruined her. And I'll show you what it's like to feel *real* pain." He pressed harder.

"Stop! Please! Stop!" I cried.

"Oh, the pain will only stop when you admit what you did. Then I'll put you out of your misery."

"I don't know who...who Ariana is. Please, it hurts."

"It's supposed to hurt, you insolent boy! Ariana is my daughter, and you destroyed her life. How can you forget? She was swinging next to you on the playground. She was throwing pebbles at your feet."

How long ago was this? "What are you talking about?"

"And then a tree fell and crushed her legs! It didn't so much as

scratch you. And she's had to suffer with prosthetics! It's your fault her legs are gone! YOUR FAULT MY DAUGHTER ISN'T MARRIED AND HAPPY!"

I dimly recalled that day. I was shocked after it had happened. It was the day before I thought my dad had died. Before the nightmares. Those were the happy days. And now Dad was gone, and I was alone with a sociopath.

"Please. I'm sorry. I didn't know my own strength back then. Please, just let me go."

"That's it? You're *sorry*? YOU TOOK AWAY HER *LIFE*! And you're *sorry*?" He pointed the gun at my head.

That was the final straw. I took a few deep breaths. I ignored the hot poker pain in my leg. I gathered my thoughts and decided it was time to act like a man. I had to do something, or he'd kill me. Maybe if I could stall him long enough, Patrick would come with the police. Didn't he say he'd call them as soon as he could?

"Luther, the police are on their way to this room as I speak. They're coming to arrest you and rescue me."

He narrowed his eyes. "You're bluffing." Whether he believed me or not, he motioned to his fellow terrorists to stand by the door. "If the police were here, they would've already broken down the door."

"They haven't come yet because Patrick just called them. But rest assured, they'll be here soon enough." I gulped down a lump in my throat. Wouldn't they?

"Theo, we both know that's not true. Now, back to my daughter."

I couldn't take it anymore. "What about *my* father?! I thought he was dead for *ten* years! Do you know what that's done to me? I've never been free of my own mind. My own despair. I had nightmares about people I loved dying! You know who I hope to see next? YOU!"

Scrash! Every window in my apartment shattered. Every book on every bookshelf flew to the floor. The pictures shot glass everywhere. Rocks the size of golf balls flew in every direction. And three trees fell startlingly close to this room. It was just the distraction I needed. Luther was knocked off his feet. My ties broke apart. And the police busted through the door.

What happened next was so fast, I honestly don't remember exactly how it happened. You tell me.

When the police busted through the door, Fredrick, Silvester, and William were put in handcuffs and taken away. Then Patrick was by my side, helping me stand. But nobody was paying any attention to

Luther Ditka's gun. Well, aside from me. And it was so close...

When everyone but three police, Patrick, and I had left the room, I made my move. I picked up Luther's gun and pointed it at him just as a policeman was cuffing him. And, of course, all three police drew their guns. One of them restraining Luther with a single hand.

"Put the gun down, son. You don't want to hurt anyone."

"He *killed* my father. He deserves to die!" I yelled.

"Pull the trigger Theo. Do it." Luther insisted.

My hands shook terribly, and I probably looked like a deranged lunatic. I felt like one too. "I'm going to kill you Ditka!"

"Please. You're all bark and no bite. Just pull the trigger Theo! KILL ME!"

Patrick placed his hand on my shoulder. "Theodore, you don't want this. Give me the gun and we'll all go home. Have mercy."

"Did he have mercy on Dad? NO! And what do you mean by *all*? We can't all go home when my father is DEAD! HE'S DEAD, PATRICK!" I placed my finger on the trigger. Tears were running down my face.

"Theodore, remember that verse I told you? What was it?"

I never forgot a Bible verse. "It was 1 Thessalonians 5:15. What does that have to do with anything?" I was so angry; I was about to shoot everyone in here. Myself included.

"What *is* the verse?"

"I DON'T CARE! LUTHER KILLED DAD! *KILLED* HIM!"

"Tell me." Patrick insisted.

"'See that no one repays evil for evil, but always seeks to do good to one another and to everyone.'"

"And that's exactly what you're doing, Theodore. Repaying evil for evil. Forgiveness is what God wants. Not this. Not revenge."

He was trying to stop me. Ditka killed his parents and sister! He should've been *helping* me!

"But...but he killed Dad. He pulled out the gun and he...he..."

"Give me the gun, son." I gave the gun to a policeman and collapsed to my knees.

"He can't be gone! I just got him back! He can't! Dad!"

I sobbed. My salty tears fell over my father's lifeless body. For ten years I'd hoped and prayed to see him again. And I had seen him alive and happy. I had loved him. And now he was gone. Taken from me twice. My father!

* * *

Patrick carried me outside to an ambulance. I cried in his arms, consumed with grief and pain. My whole body hurt. My leg was still bleeding badly. I think someone said something about losing too much blood. Eh, probably my imagination. I can recall my mother sitting with me in the ambulance. And then I drifted into dark bliss.

* * *

I was being rolled through doors on a gurney when I awoke. And my leg was on fire with hot pokers pricking me. Mom was still with me, holding tightly to my hand. But Dad would never hold my hand again. And Patrick was there too, looking worried and scared.

"M-Mom? Where are we? What's happening?"

"Shhh. They're going to fix your leg. I love you, Teddy." It sounded like she was saying goodbye.

Patrick squeezed my shoulder. "'He heals the brokenhearted and binds their wounds.' Psalm 147:3." My eyes closed, and the world faded.

* * *

The second time I opened my eyes, I was lying in a hospital bed. A big glass window took up the wall on my left. And the door was on my right. In front of me was a large TV, muted but playing the news. And next to my bed on the left and right were Patrick and Mom. Both of them were fast asleep.

I laid my head down and thought things over. My dad was dead. He would never show up as Oscar Gilligan again, or anyone else. He was gone forever. His body was who knew where and waiting to be buried. But a verse came to me, and I spoke it aloud:

"'And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.' Revelations 21:4."

I closed my eyes and let my tears fall, let my grief go. I couldn't be the sad one. Mom needed me, and I needed to be strong. In my faith, my love, and my mind. For my father's sake, I would be the man of the house. But not yet. I needed to feel the pain a little longer. Let my emotions run wild.

"Teddy!" Mom hugged me tight, and I hugged her back. No words could say what that hug did. If every dictionary had a million different words, there still wouldn't be enough.

I turned to Patrick; he was frowning at me. “Theodore, I-”

“Thank you so much. If you hadn’t been there…well, Luther wouldn’t be the only one in jail. Hey, speaking of Luther, what about Fred, Willy, and Vest?”

“They’re in jail too. Don’t worry.” He smiled and tears came to his eyes. “I’m so glad you’re alive, Theodore. And I’m truly sorry about your father. If only I would’ve called the police sooner…”

“No, Patrick. It’s not your fault. Even if the police had come, he still would’ve…killed Dad. There was nothing you could do.”

He leaned over and hugged me. I’d been waiting for him to do that. I hugged him back and really broke down. All my bottled-up emotions over the years came pouring out. My anger at Luther. My sadness and depression. My frustration. My grief and confusion. All of it came out in tears on Patrick’s shoulder. And he held me tightly. He held me as a father would. THE END

AFTERWORD

Dad's funeral was sad, depressing. Mom was a wreck. I sobbed, again. But Patrick was there to comfort us. He was there to love us. And I really loved him too.

Well, after that Patrick proposed to my mother and they were married. But I didn't think of Patrick Frass as my stepfather, I thought of him as my *father*. And Mom and I changed our names to Frass. And obviously we renovated the house after what I did. Heh...

And Ms. Driggs? Yeah, she became a pregnant Mrs. Kolter. She told me she was going to name her baby boy Victor. And Bertha was like my grandma, making those unbelievably delicious cookies.

Luther, Fredrick, William, and Silvester would live their lives in prison. Actually, Ditka was up for the death penalty. I have no comment on that.

Anyway, I started back at school, which I'd never think of as the same place. Ben was ecstatic to see me. And Milly became my girlfriend. I still don't know how that one happened. I hadn't even spoken to her. Oh well. A win is a win.

I hope you enjoyed the story of a madman's life. And I hope you can take this Bible verse to heart.

"And may you have the power to understand, as all God's people should, how wide, how long, how high, and how deep his love is. May you experience the love of Christ, though it is too great to understand fully. Then you will be made complete with all the fullness of life and the power that comes from God."

Ephesians 3:18-21.

Thank you, dearest readers. Live life to its fullest. Goodbye.
Teddy out.

SOME DIAGNOSES CAN CHANGE YOUR LIFE FOR THE BETTER.

Teddy learns that ADHD isn't the only thing that can make your life hard. When he's diagnosed with schizophrenia, they start coming after him.

Terrorists, doctors, and guns. That's what Teddy faces when he's diagnosed. The school bullies were nothing compared to what he was getting himself into. Will he be able to escape the Demonized Clowns? Or is revenge the real enemy?

But God's word helps him through everything. And it will help you too.